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INTRODUCTION

I remember the first time I heard of the Camino...

My then girlfriend and I had driven down in blazing sunshine from her house on the river Lot only to find the Basque coast, as it often is, shrouded in misty rain. We then spent the entire weekend bickering.

On the Sunday afternoon, in Jean Pied de Port, we stood on a bridge over the river Nive and looked at each other and laughed for the first time that day. Because both of us knew we were thinking about shoving the other in. It was shortly afterwards we saw some people in hiking gear with backpacks and she told me, 'People still walk from here to Galicia, it's an old pilgrimage route.' I don't remember my exact reaction but it was something along the lines of:

Why the hell would anybody want to do that?

Ten years later I still haven't found a simple answer to that question. But, I've had a lot of fun looking! Because, despite my initial cynicism, the seed of an idea planted in me that day has grown to be something of an obsession. This book is the product of that obsession. I hope you'll find it informative and helpful and that it will see you safely to your earthly destination.

Gerald Kelly

OUR COMPANION WEBSITES
Don’t forget to download our free guides to accommodation and services on the Caminos with all the information you’ll need while walking:

• www.caminoguide.net for the Camino Francés
• www.viadelaplataguide.net for the Vía de la Plata

Also for more details on packing for the Camino see www.caminoguide.net/packing
What is the Camino?

The Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St James, is a network of pilgrimage routes which brings pilgrims from all corners of Europe, across Spain to the city of Santiago de Compostela, believed by many to be the final resting place of Saint James (the Greater) the Apostle.

These routes have existed for about a thousand years and all through those centuries thousands of people each year have set out from their homes to travel to Santiago on foot or on horseback.

The Camino Francés, or French Way, from the pintoerque French village of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Santiago, was always the busiest of these routes. It’s where Caminos from all over Europe converge to cross northern Spain.

In the last thirty years the Camino Francés has once again become very popular with pilgrims due in part of the film The Way. It is now walked by thousands of people every year. The full Camino Francés is almost 800km long and most people take about thirty days to walk it. However, many other people chose to just walk the last 100km from Sarria, which usually takes about five days.

Other routes (and there is many other routes) such as the Vía de la Plata, from Seville, and the Camino del Norte, along the north coast of Spain, have also become more popular, but not to the same degree as the Camino Francés.

About this book

This book is intended for people planning to walk a Camino for the first time. It contains detailed, practical, impartial information and advice to help you prepare. It is based on the author's personal experience gained over fifteen years walking Caminos and on the experiences of many other pilgrims.

Rather than trying to reduce Camino preparation to a check-list it tries to assist you in making informed decisions and help you avoid pitfalls. It covers (among others) the following areas:

- **Money**: How much walking the Camino costs
- **Travel**: How to get to your starting point
- **Physical preparation**: Getting to the required level of fitness
- **Packing**: Equipment you need and what you don't need
- **Which section and when**: When to walk, which part to walk
- **What to expect**: The Camino experience

In addition, there's an introduction to both Spanish and Camino History, a Spanish Language Phrasebook with vocabulary chosen to cover Camino necessities, and background information of all sorts to help you plan and prepare.

This book is a companion to the books Walking Guide to the Camino de Santiago and Walking Guide to the Vía de la Plata (also available from Amazon in Kindle and printed formats), which contain the information you'll need about accommodation and services, etc. while walking the Camino Francés and the Vía de la Plata. However,
since this book is all about preparation, it can be used entirely independently of any walking guide.

Although much of the information in this book could be useful for any Camino, some parts of it refer specifically to the Camino Francés.

This is a self-published book. Please accept my apologies for any mistakes. You can help by sending corrections and any comments about content or omissions to caminoguidecontact@gmail.com. Because a new copy of the book is printed every time somebody orders one, corrections and additions can be made immediately, without having to wait for a new edition.

This book was first published in 2012. Since then it has been updated regularly to take account of changes on the Camino. This edition was published in January 2020.

**MEASUREMENT UNITS AND EURO AMOUNTS**

All distances are given in the metric system (kilometres and metres) and all times are given in the 24 hour clock (09:00 = 9am, 18:00 = 6pm).

**Temperatures** are given in Celsius. Celsius temperatures are easy to understand:

- 0°C = freezing point of water
- 10°C = cold
- 20°C = warm
- 30°C = hot
- 100°C = boiling point of water

There's a handy converter here [www.celsius-to-fahrenheit.com](http://www.celsius-to-fahrenheit.com)

The format for writing amounts reflects the most commonly used format in Spain.

- eg. One euro = 1€, fifty cents = 0,50€, one thousand euros = 1.000€ (see page 59).

**A NOTE ON THE WORD PILGRIM**

As I'm not particularly religious in any conventional sense, it took me years before I came to see myself as a pilgrim, and to use that word unselfconsciously. Now, I call myself a pilgrim when I go on the Camino, and I regard all of the other people there as pilgrims too. I no longer see this word as being uniquely associated with organised religion, and I use it inclusively in this guide to refer to everybody who sets out from their home on the open road looking for something (meaning, answers, solace, purpose, etc.)

**THANKS / BUÍOCHAS / GRACIAS / DANKE**


**References to the Glossary**

Wherever you see (G) after a word it means there's an explanatory note about it in the Glossary on page 138.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Everybody prepares in their own way, everybody packs in their own way and everybody walks the Camino in their own way. The following are suggestions to help you prepare.

Physical preparation

If you're unsure about your physical preparedness, try walking your target daily distance with a full backpack.

If you struggle, you need to either set yourself an exercise regime and work your way up to your target. Alternatively, you could reduce your daily distance target for the first week or so until your fitness level improves. Accommodation is plentiful on the Camino and it can be taken at an extremely leisurely pace if you so desire. The key is finding a pace that suits you.

Walking long distances every day is different from doing it occasionally because your body doesn't get a chance to recover and heal. It takes about a week to find your rhythm, so set yourself modest goals for the first few days.

If you've never before walked long distances, it's important to get an idea before you set out of what it feels like and what you're capable of. Finding and sticking to your own pace is very important in avoiding injury.

Your physical preparation should be done while breaking in your walking footwear and getting accustomed to carrying your backpack at its packed weight. It doesn't matter what you put in it - it can be water in plastic bottles (1 litre of water = 1kg) - as long as it weights 7kg or 8kg minimum. You should aim to do your Camino training from as early as possible in "full Camino mode": Backpack, boots, everything.

You should begin well before you're due to leave. Try doing three or four short (one or two hour) hikes a week and one longer one (always carrying your backpack). The longer one could start off being two or three hours but you should work this up gradually to about five hours (about 20km). Include a few hills. If you can manage that you'll be fine. You don't need to be super fit to walk the Camino, the chances are many people reading this are fit enough already.

Which part to walk?

Walking the entire Camino Francés from Saint-Jean to Santiago (775km) takes about 31 days at 25km a day. If you haven't got 31 days to spare, below are some suggestions for shorter itineraries.

If you've got limited time the most obvious and popular suggestion would be to walk the last 111km from Sarria. If getting a Compostela certificate (G) is important to you, then that's what you should do. If you start in Sarria it's important that you get at least one other stamp (see under Credencial, page 39), besides the one from the hostel where you slept, each day from a hostel or some other establishment along the
route. This is to provide extra proof when you go to the Pilgrims' Office in Santiago that you did actually walk.

However, bear in mind that the Sarria to Santiago stretch can become very crowded in summer. If you're more interested in experiencing the Camino with the intention of one day walking the whole thing and you want to experience a little of the history, solitude, camaraderie and beauty of the Camino, consider one of the following suggestions:

**Saint-Jean to Puente la Reina** is about five days walking, or six if you break the stage from Saint-Jean to Roncesvalles. It takes in some beautiful and historical villages, the city of Pamplona and some lovely scenery. Alternatively starting in Roncesvalles will avoid that difficult first stage and allow you to finish in Estella.

**Pamplona to Logroño** is about four days with two more to *Santo Domingo de la Calzada*. Again, beautiful, historic and the city of Logroño is fantastic. Both cities are easily accessible by bus and train.

If you want to experience something of the *Meseta* (G), you could start in *Burgos* and walk about four days to *Carrión de los Condes* or about ten days to *León*. The Meseta gets a bad press because there isn't much pretty scenery, but some people consider this flat bit in the middle to be the high point of their experience. On the Meseta, the very lack of things to see is, in itself, something to see.

If you've got about two weeks you could consider starting in *León* or *Astorga* and walking to Santiago. Or you could stop in Sarria, which would be about eight or nine days from León.

Of course, the ideal is to walk the whole thing in one go. It takes about a month and it has a strange symmetry. Up to Pamplona you're still a child learning how things work, and wide-eyed at everything you see around you. Then to Burgos you're an adolescent, excitable and curious. Then the middle part as far as Astorga is the part of the Camino, that's like the long, sunny afternoon of life that you think will never end. Then gradually the mountains drift into view for several days before you reach them and you relish the thought of climbing them because you're an experienced walker and as fit as a fiddle but you're also a bit settled in your ways; you have your 'Camino family' and you feel like you've known them for ever. There's also the feeling that you're slowly drifting towards an end point. Which, when you reach it is the greatest celebration and outpouring of relief and happiness. Finally, rest!

Finisterre is the bonus, the icing on the cake. An opportunity to reflect on all that has gone before and how it's possible to fit a lifetime's experience into thirty days. And to figure out how the hell you're going to go back to real life.

**When to walk?**

From a weather perspective most of the Camino is walkable at all times of the year. However, mountainous areas may be difficult or impassible if there is snow and you should follow local advice about how to proceed. During the winter the upper pass over the Pyrenees (the one that goes through Orisson) is closed, so you must go the Valcarlos route.

From the perspective of numbers of people walking things have changed in the last ten years. Ten years ago summer was the busiest time on the whole Camino and
numbers declined in a very predictable bell-curve for the rest of the year, with January being the quietest month. Today this is only true on the last 100km.

**THE LAST 100KM**

If you’re just walking the last 100km then the August peak still applies with another peak during Easter and for a couple of weeks after it. During these time (meaning from Easter until the end of August) there’ll be a lot of people walking from Sarria to Santiago. However, the majority of people will start from Sarria at the weekend, so if your departure date is flexible it’s a good idea to plan to start from Sarria, or to pass through there, mid-week.

*I’ve walked the last 100km twice in the past three years. In 2018 I arrived in Sarria mid-morning on a Wednesday in late July having walked from Bayonne. Sarria was like a ghost town and from there to Santiago I had no problems finding accommodation. In 2019 I joined the Camino Francés from the Camino Primitivo at Melide, it was a Thursday, again absolutely no problems with accommodation and very little in the way of crowding.*

**THE CAMINO BEFORE SARRIA**

On the rest of the Camino three distinct seasons have developed which for simplicity sake we will call: *winter, summer and spring / autumn* (Spring / autumn are grouped together because basically the same things apply to both.)

**SPRING / AUTUMN**

_Easter to May and September to October_

**Advantages:** Good chance of pleasant, dry weather. All facilities open.

**Disadvantages:** Possibility of rain, especially in the west. Possible overcrowding because many people choose to walk in the “side seasons” to avoid the heat and “overcrowding” of summer. From early September things tends to remain busy up until mid-October.

**SUMMER**

_June to August_

**Advantages:** Fine weather. Lots of people walking with a good mix of ages and types. All facilities open. No shortage of accommodation (bearing in mind the advice to avoid hitting Sarria on a weekend).

**Disadvantages:** Can be very hot.

**WINTER**

_November to Easter_

**Advantages:** Very few other pilgrims. Cool weather is good for walking.

**Disadvantages:** Very few other pilgrims (yep, it’s in both columns!) Many hostels and cafés closed. Rain, wind, and especially in the mountains, snow and cold. Short days. Mud. (please also see *Walking in winter, next section*)

>In the last four years I’ve been on the Camino Francés in summer three times, once finishing in Logroño, once walking the whole way from Bayonne, and once from Melide to Santiago. On all occasions I never once saw a full albergue. In fact, before the last 100km, some of them were only opening for pre-booked groups because they weren’t getting enough walk-ins.*
The advice about not being in Sarria at the weekend also applies, albeit to a lesser extent, to other major starting points along the Camino (for a list of them see Starting Points under Statistics, page 86). The biggest starting points also have a knock-on effect along the Camino. For example, a wave of people leave Saint-Jean on Saturday and Sunday and then pass through Pamplona three days later on Tuesday and Wednesday. This can make a pronounced difference to the numbers walking for a couple of days after the major starting points.

**Walking in winter**

Apart from the weather, walking in winter (December, January, February and March) presents other difficulties. Firstly, many pilgrim hostels will be closed (sometimes even those that claim to be open all year). This applies especially to small hostels and private hostels. Also many other businesses along the Camino that cater to pilgrims, such as shops and cafés, shut during winter months or operate with reduced hours.

So, walking in winter requires more planning than walking in summer. However, if you plan your stages to end in or close to a larger town or village (generally, those with several pilgrim hostels) you should always find at least one hostel and other facilities open. Failing that, as a last resort, there's always at least one enterprising individual to fill the gap with alternative accommodation. If you're stuck, try asking local people or in shops and cafés.

It's also a good idea to stock up on basic food (bread, cheese, etc.) when you get the chance, rather than assume you'll be able to do so later in the day. If a village shop is closed, ask around nearby. The chances are you'll be able to find out at what time they will open.

Hospitaleros can often provide you with reliable information about what's open on the next stage. Remember the Spanish for open/closed – abierto/cerrado. There is also a really useful and regularly updated internet list of winter hostels, it's at www.aprinca.com/alberguesinvierno

**Packing: What to bring?**

One of the great things about the Camino is that you really need very little stuff to do it. This makes it a good exercise in de-cluttering or seeing what's important and what isn't. The two lists below, covering Essential and Inessential Equipment.

**Essential equipment:** these are the things you **will need** on the Camino. This list doesn’t vary much from person to person. The main difference is between summer walking and the rest of the year. eg. You need rainwear all year round but the rainwear you need in August is not the same rainwear you need in January.

**Other equipment:** The items on this list may be very useful or even essential, under certain circumstances, but you could either buy or find them easily on the Camino. Whether you pack these items depends on the likelihood of needing them, difficulty of buying or finding them, and their weight/bulkiness.

As a general rule, you should aim to carry **no more than 10% of your body weight** in your backpack. So, if you weigh 70kg, you should have no more than 7kg on your back. This suggested maximum assumes you're fairly close to your medically

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**Page 10**
recommended weight. If you're unfit or overweight, you should aim for less than 10%. If your pack is too heavy, you will have difficulties. You can quickly find out if your pack is too heavy by carrying it for a test Camino day (at least five or six hours walking).

The Camino is not a wilderness walk and you'll never be more than a couple of hours from a shop or café. However, when packing you should take into account that you will need to carry some food and water. A litre of water weighs 1kg, so at the start of each day you'll have an extra 2kg, or thereabouts, in your backpack.

The **Golden Rule of Packing**: Look at each item and ask **Will I really NEED this to walk the Camino?** If the answer is **no** then leave it at home. If the answer is **maybe**, then think hard about the pros and cons of bringing it.

The number one mistake first-timers make is bringing too much stuff. They nearly kill themselves for the first few days trying to carry it, then have to go to the trouble and expense of sending things home or onwards to Santiago.

If you haven't done this kind of thing before, you should test pack to make sure it all fits and that you can carry it comfortably for eight or so hours (and there is only one way to find out!) Pack heavy items at the bottom of your backpack and close to your body, to get as much weight as possible on your hips rather than on your shoulders. Finding the best adjustment for your backpack is often a matter of trial and error, and what works for one person won't necessarily work for another. Modern backpacks can be adjusted in several ways; experiment with these to find what works best for you. Once on the Camino, you can ask advice from more experienced pilgrims if your backpack feels uncomfortable, or if you're getting shoulder or back pains.

**NB.** This book does not endorse any particular brands. Many companies produce good equipment and / or clothes, and when one is mentioned here, it's just as an example of what many pilgrims find useful.

*The website caminoguide.net/packing goes into more detail about my own personal experience, with links to information about, and photos of, equipment I use personally or which have been recommended by others.*

### Packing: Essential equipment

#### FOOTWEAR

Most pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago bring two pairs of footwear; one for **walking** and one for **resting**. Resting your feet when the day's walk is over is very important and changing to light, comfortable footwear is a good way to do this. This is discussed in more detail below.

Your walking footwear is your single most important piece of equipment. Choosing suitable and comfortable walking footwear, and taking the time to break them in, is very important (See Blisters page 65). If at all possible buy your footwear from a shop that specialises in hiking equipment. A serious outdoor shop will have staff who hike themselves, who'll be able to point you in the direction of the type of footwear you need and who'll know how to measure your feet and match that to a size and type of boot. Consider buying a little bigger than your normal size because your feet will most likely swell after a few weeks walking.
Afternoon or evening is the best time to try on footwear because your feet swell as the day goes on. Wear the socks you intend to wear on the Camino. Make sure you have some wiggle-room for your toes, the should not be jammed together or rubbing of the inside of the shoe.

On the Camino there's quite a lot of walking on gravel paths and paved surfaces so whatever footwear you chose it needs to have good cushioning in the sole.

**There are two main options for walking footwear:**

Running shoes / trainers or hiking boots.

**RUNNING SHOES / TRAINERS**

In summer it's possible to walk the Camino in a pair of light running shoes with a thick or cushioned sole.

The **advantage** is that they're light. They're made of soft material so are less likely to cause blisters. They're comfortable to wear in hot weather. They're designed for running on hard surfaces so they give your feet enough support and protection to deal with the distances and terrain involved in walking the Camino. They also usually have a degree of breathability. Unlike boots, running shoes generally need zero cleaning and polishing. Unlike leather boots, running shoes don't need breaking in. They should be comfortable from the beginning, provided you get a pair that suits you and that fits correctly.

The **disadvantages** are that most running shoes aren't waterproof so if it rains (and it always rains at some stage) your feet will get wet. Since it's unlikely to be cold (we're talking about the summer here) or to rain for days at a time, you're not in danger of getting hypothermia and your running shoes should dry out pretty quickly once the sun comes out again. So, wet feet is more an inconvenience than a serious problem. Another disadvantage in wet weather is that running shoes aren't very good in the mud and they and your socks will quickly be covered in the stuff. This again is more an (unsightly) inconvenience than a major problem, and if you wash your shoes and leave them out to dry, they'll be ready to use again in the morning (although they're unlikely to dry properly until the sun comes out). In addition, shoes don't give as much support and protection to your ankles as full hiking boots. This may lead to fatigue or injury. In summary, running shoes are comfortable and light and great in dry and hot weather, but in wet weather they don't give much protection against the wet or mud.

**HIKING BOOTS**

Hiking boots are by far the the most popular type of walking footwear among long-distance pilgrims year round and almost the only kind worn outside the summer months. Most pilgrims go for light leather and Gore-Tex mix hiking boots rather than heavier mountaineering type boots.

Their **advantages** are that they are designed for walking long distances over mixed terrain and in variable weather conditions. The high ankle offers some extra support to your ankle and some protection from twists, although this will vary by boot and how tightly you lace them. Most of the light hiking boots people walk the Camino in don't actually offer that much ankle protection, especially if you don't lace them up tightly, as most people don't. (This could be important for inexperienced hikers who may need time before they build strength in their lower legs.) They have a strong, cushioned sole with good all-weather grip. A Gore-Tex layer adds waterproofing and
breathability. They offer good protection against the cold when walking in cold weather or on frozen ground. In snow they offer good protection against both the cold and melted snow wetting your feet. An additional benefit, when you're walking in shorts you'll get fewer pebbles in your boots than you will in shoes and you can reduce this again by rolling the tops of your socks over the tops of your boots.

The disadvantages of hiking boots include that they're heavier than running shoes and less comfortable in hot weather. They can be quite stiff, if not fully broken in, which increases the danger of blisters. It takes longer to put them on and take them off when you stop for a rest or when you get a pebble in them. Boots are also bulky and so difficult to pack away if you don't want to wear them for your whole walking day. Caring for boots properly is not easy on the Camino (although this may not be an important consideration for you). If they are not properly cared for they will quickly lose their waterproof qualities. The type of care varies by brand of boot so the manufacturer's instructions are the last word on this, but generally it consists of cleaning the boots regularly and treating them with a spray or cream which renews their waterproof qualities and breathability, and lubricates the leather, hence lessening its tendency to crack at bend points. In the context of hiking for 30 or so consecutive days you should ideally be cleaning and treating them every three or four days in order to get the longest possible useful life from them. That would mean bringing an adequate supply of cleaning material with you, adding weight to your pack, which for most people isn't an option. Olive oil, which is available in most Spanish restaurants, is quite good as a leather lubricant, but naturally the manufacturer’s recommendations are best. Don't leave wet leather to dry near a heat source; this can damage the leather and lessen its waterproofing.

RESTING FOOTWEAR

The term resting footwear refers to the footwear you'll wear when you're finished walking for the day and are going around looking at the sights, or just relaxing. Good resting footwear should be light, because you have to carry it all day. It should be compact enough to fit in your backpack or attachable to your backpack in some way. It should be loose fitting and/or soft so that if you do get blisters or discomfort of any sort your resting footwear won't make them worse. It should be comfortable enough to walk around in and be well ventilated to allow your feet to breathe (and possibly heal) after a long day being cooped up. Other desirable characteristics are that it can be worn in the shower and dries quickly. It's also potentially very useful if your resting footwear is capable of replacing your main footwear, at least some of the time (you'd be surprised how many people end up walking some of the way in their resting footwear).

Don't worry if your resting footwear doesn't meet all of these criteria; the main thing is comfort and lightness. It's entirely possible that you already own a pair of shoes that would fit the bill perfectly – and be well broken in.

There are many types of suitable footwear. Flip-flops (called Thongs in some countries) are very light and compact, but not everybody finds walking in them comfortable. Crocs and similar plastic shoes, are light, but again not everybody finds them comfortable. Sandals are great too and outdoor sandals such as those made by Teva are light and compact and you could actually hike in them (at least in good weather). Light canvas shoes like Converse are also good but not so well ventilated.
In the interests of full disclosure, I have to mention that I have never walked the Camino in anything other than Ecco boots and sandals (website global.ecco.com), and I have only once had reason to regret my choice. I'm now on my third pair of identical boots. I get about two Caminos from a pair before they stop being waterproof. Between pair two and three I digressed and bought a pair of Ecco boots of a slightly different and lighter design, but after about ten days walking I got pressure sores on the soles of my feet, mostly towards the end of the day. My holidays were over anyway, but this could have been a bit of a disaster had I been planning to go on. The lighter boots had less well cushioned soles, which I think caused the problem, and so I reverted to the old reliables for my next trip. My Ecco sandals serve as my resting footwear, despite being a bit on the heavy side. I think the extra weight is worth it because they're very comfortable to walk in. On hot days, I switch into them at about midday and carry my boots. On my first Camino, I wore my sandals exclusively for the final two weeks because my boots had become too tight. My next pair of boots I got one size bigger and they've been fine even on the longest Camino. Despite knowing exactly what works for me, I always time buying boots to break them in for at least six months before heading off on the Camino.

There is still a small number of hardy souls whose choice of footwear sets them apart from the common herd. I once met a guy from Luxembourg who walks the Camino every autumn wearing flip-flops. His choice of footwear didn’t seem to be any impediment to him. But he did favour a particular brand of Brazilian flip-flops. One summer, I met an Irish guy walking in Converse. He said they were fine and he hadn't had a single blister. The prize for audacity goes to a Spanish guy I met on the Camino Mosarabé, during the Biblical deluge of May 2012. He was walking in his socks from Granada, having made a promesa that if his mother recovered from an illness he’d walk to Santiago descalzado (literally without shoes, although it's often translated as barefoot). He was doing fine, no major injuries, taking his time. The torrential rain wasn't affecting him any more than anybody else. He drew wonderful cartoons illustrating his progress and daily drenching in the libros de peregrinos.

**Rainwear**

Most modern rainwear includes Gore-Tex or some other waterproof and breathable material. (For the technical low-down see page 144.) There are several options when it comes to rainwear and the most important factor is the time of year you'll be walking. In the **summer months** you can be minimalistic because you're unlikely to encounter long periods of heavy rain, wind and cold. **Outside of the summer months**, and the closer to January, the greater probability of needing serious rainwear that can also serve as cold weather wear.

**Waterproof Jacket**

A waterproof jacket is a good idea all year round, though in summer you could manage without one if you take a poncho instead. In summer a light jacket is fine but it should be loose-fitting so that you can wear layers under it on cold mornings and in the mountains. In the depths of winter, however, you will need a warm jacket. A **good waterproof jacket** should ideally be a loose fit for layering. It should come to below your waist so water dripping down will mostly fall on the ground (looseness helps here too). It should fasten with a zip and have a flap which covers the zip when
it's closed to prevent water seeping in, especially when walking into headwinds. It should have a hood with pull-strings to keep it in place on windy days. The collar should be sealable (if the zip doesn't go all the way up) to prevent water dripping in and heat escaping. The sleeves should also be sealable around the wrists to prevent heat loss. The zips should be sturdy and have big, easy to grip fasteners so you can work them while wearing gloves. It should have big pockets with zip fasteners and ideally a couple of inside pockets too. Resealable vents under the arms also help to regulate temperature. Finally, it should roll or fold small enough to fit in your backpack.

The quality of the material used is one factor in how much protection your jacket will give you from getting wet. Other factors include its general "build quality". Are seams tightly stitched and sealed? When you're wearing it with the hood up, does water drip down inside? Does water enter through pockets? Does it enter through zips? Does it enter underneath the straps of your backpack?

The advantages of a waterproof jacket are that it will help to keep you dry and warm. Because of its breathability, it's comfortable to wear in warm rain as well as cold. It won't flap around in the wind like a poncho and will be easier to put on and take off. It has pockets. It's good to wear if it gets cold in the evenings or even when you stop for a short break. It keeps your upper body dry and some of them even look nice (lets face it, in a poncho you'll look like a walking tent.)

The disadvantages are that they can be quite bulky to pack away, especially the winter ones, which is another reason why layering is such a good idea. In a prolonged downpour you'll more than likely discover the limits to its waterproofing as water may seep in through seams and under the waist and shoulder straps of your backpack. However, a good jacket will still keep you fairly dry and warm despite a little seepage because its breathable qualities will help to expel any water that gets inside.

WATERPROOF PANTS (OR, IF YOU PREFER, TROUSERS)
Most pilgrims use the baggy waterproof pants which are designed to be worn as an extra layer over your normal clothes. Waterproof pants are excellent for cold and wet weather and in snow. In summer you might experience a couple of day of rain but it won't be very cold, so you could manage with shorts or light pants made of a quick-drying material. At other times of the year, the extra rain and cold protection will be important in the mountains, where you'll frequently encounter freezing temperatures.

Waterproof pants can be bought in the cheap plastic variety or the less-cheap Gore-Tex variety. They all do the waterproof thing, but if you want breathability you have to spend a bit more. Breathability is not as important as it is for jackets because (especially in cold weather) the lower half of your body won't sweat as much as the upper half.

Make sure the leg-bottoms are wide enough to allow you to put them on and take them off without having to remove your boots. Some models have a zip at the bottom of the leg which widens the opening enough to be able to take it off without a struggle.

There are also top-end waterproof pants made of advanced space-age materials which look like normal pants and are worn next to your skin and are not designed to be layered. These work well but are only really suitable for a mid-winter Camino.